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The Spatial Politics of Street Art in Post-Revolution Egypt ¹

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Introduction

On the 25th January 2011, tens of thousands of Egyptians took to the streets of Cairo and other cities to demand the removal Hosni Mubarak's 30 year-long reign. After 18 days of sit-ins, marches and violent attempts to remove the protesters, Mubarak stepped down on the 11th February 2011. Mobilizations would continue in the subsequent years, with protesters demanding revolution against an entire system of governance, targeting Mubarak's successors, including direct military rule and that of the Muslim Brotherhood group. Such political action would come to a halt in June 2013, when a military-backed government returned to power and presided over a severe security crackdown.

The proliferation of large, eye-catching street art and graffiti was one of the most striking aspects of the period described above. However, and in contrast to much of the scholarship that presented the "explosion of graffiti" (Sorbera 2014: 67, see also Jarbou 2017) as a new phenomenon of the uprising, Egypt's experience with graffiti is not a new one. Indeed, the country has a long history with writing and drawing on walls. What was different during and in the period following the January uprising was the emergence of a new form of graffiti featuring a far more pronounced political angle. In this context, scholarship has focused on the use of graffiti as a form of narration (Abaza 2013) or as a newly-found freedom of expression. However, Egypt's graffiti and street art have not yet been studied in a systematic manner as sites of politics. The graffiti acted not only as narrations of the revolutionary moment but were themselves attempts to reimagine political community and public spaces in the country.

¹ Sections of this paper form a part of my unfinished doctoral thesis at the University of Warwick's Department of Politics and International Studies (PAIS)

In what follows, I will argue that street art and graffiti are important elements of political struggle. This is due to the forms' role in marking and re-appropriating spaces, leading to potentially new spaces in which politics can take place. I am therefore putting forward a reading of street art and graffiti that see them as sites of politics through both aesthetic and spatial approaches. To do so I draw on Jacques Rancière's concept of 'dissensus', a term referring to a political and aesthetic process that creates new modes of perception and novel forms of political subjectivity. I will also pay particularly close attention to the often-underexplored spatial element of his thought. In his seminal essay 'Ten Theses on Politics' (2001), for example, Rancière argues that part of the work of 'dissensus' is the creation of spaces where political activity can take place. As spatially bound practices, street art and graffiti can allow a visible 'dissensus' to take place.

I begin with a discussion on the concepts of street art and graffiti and how I deploy them throughout the article, as well covering the debates surrounding their legality/illegality. A section on the history of graffiti in Egypt will follow, indicating how it was often a reflection of Egyptian society in the years prior to the 2011 Uprising. The 'rupture' of 2011 can therefore be seen in the move towards the use of graffiti/street art as an overtly political form. Building on this, I will explore the intersections between art and politics, through a reading of Rancière's notion of a politics of aesthetics. I will also analyse artworks by various graffiti artists that emerged during the post-2011 period as spatial and aesthetic practices that were important in the struggle against Mubarak and the regimes that succeeded him. That many of the artworks were collaborative and interactive was crucial to their power; as visual palimpsests, these murals were sites where audience and activists would converge, where imaginaries of a new society could be explored and shared.

The ambiguity of street art and graffiti

Popular and media discourse on street art and graffiti often revolve around whether they constitute criminal or creative acts (Avramidis and Tsilimpounidi 2017, Evans 2016). However, I would argue that the debate over street art and graffiti's legality/illegality misses important points regarding their role and place in the city, as well as questions of shifting tastes. It also ignores how graffiti and street art are embedded in a society's social and political fabric. Graffiti and street art capture "spatio-social interactions between the placing of people and the ways humans inhabit and (inform) their spaces" (Avramidis and Tsilimpounidi 2017: 2). They are primarily urban phenomena, often coming into direct competition with 'sanctioned' texts in a city, such as advertisements or street signs (Carrington 2009). In a more specific definition, graffiti is seen as an "unsolicited, frequently illegal, act of image-making" (Avramidis and Tsilimpounidi 2017:4). Street art meanwhile, is also a form of image making, but its focus is less on words, making it less cryptic and open to a wider audience. Other authors, such as Carrington, see street art as falling under the larger umbrella of graffiti (2009). In this paper, I am using both terms to differentiate between the two forms that existed before and after the Egyptian uprising. Both graffiti and street art are physical acts and cultural practices that are spatially and socially bound, linking the material and immaterial. The very act of creating, displaying or reading texts and images is a social practice linked to wider flows of power and identity (Carrington 2009).

There is an ambiguity to graffiti and street art, in that they are simultaneously ripe for commodification, but also still hold potential as mediums for political dissent. This is not necessarily a modern development; consider, for example, Walter Benjamin's observation on the decorated walls of 1920s Marseille:

"The better ones [...] are in the pay of the ruling class. They are covered with gaudy patterns and have sold their whole length many hundreds of times to the latest brand of aperitif, to department stores, to the 'Chocolat Menier', or Dolores del Rio. In the

poorer quarters, they are politically mobilized and post their spacious red letters as the forerunners of red guards in front of dockyards and arsenals.” (Benjamin 1999: 135)

This ambiguity continues in the present day. In the age of ‘city branding’, street art remains the target of both censure and criminalisation on the one hand, and mainstream acceptance on the other. Increased sentences and fines (up to £5,000 in the United Kingdom for example) have not diminished a growing attention from the arts industry (Evans 2016). Despite this “dual onslaught from different dominant cultures” (Evans 2016: 170) of police and city officials and art galleries and curators, an understanding of graffiti as a counter-hegemonic medium remains. This can be attributed to the stigma attached since the 1970s to the modern form of graffiti and graffiti-writing as an illicit activity (Austin 2001). But it is also due to graffiti’s ability to draw on different communities’ particular experiences, thereby illustrating how “social life can be constructed in ways different from the dominant conceptions of reality” (Lachman 1988: 232). Writing and drawing on walls therefore breaks rigidly constructed images of the city and provides evidence of an alternative city, evidence of the “presence of two worlds in one” (Rancière 2001:22). Their role in contexts of uprising and political struggle is therefore not surprising.

Egyptian street art and graffiti: 2011 as rupture?

Graffiti is not a single entity or genre. Indeed, as Carrington states, it is more of an “umbrella to indicate the generally unsanctioned texts written onto city surfaces [...] ranging from apparently random scribbles to elegant street art” (Carrington 2009: 412). Graffiti literature identifies three types of the form: tagging – marking or spray-painting a name or initials onto a wall or other property –, to throw ups – slightly more ornate and stylised tags –, to ‘pieces’ – from the term masterpiece, these are larger and more complex works. Similar to murals, they usually require more skill and time to produce (Cooper and Chalfant 1984). Prior to the

uprising, Egypt's experience with wall-writings was with advertisements, religious pleas, romantic declarations, or expressions of support for a football team (Schielke and Winegar 2012). It was not only walls that were the target of messages, as evidenced in Sayed Oweiss' systematic analysis of texts on vehicles throughout 1960s Egypt which provided insights into public values and emotions (Oweiss 1971, Schielke 2018). Likewise, Egypt's wall-writings were mostly clearly legible and comprehensible texts (Schielke 2018). Viewing Oweiss' research from the 1960s in conjunction with more contemporary studies suggests Egyptians have long used scribbles, writings and drawings to communicate the realities and hardships of everyday life.

The scholarly and popular fascination with Egypt's post-uprising street art features a strongly orientalist discourse on the "awakening of revolutionary art" (Scheid 2012), that completely ignores this long history. This also raises questions regarding commodification of 'revolutionary art' on the international market. Furthermore, what gets termed 'revolutionary art' has turned into a lucrative domain for different cultural fields, be it photography, publishing or exhibitions at Cairo-based foreign cultural centres (Abaza 2016). Nonetheless, as I will show in this article, there is much to be gained from studying Egypt's post-uprising street art. But I do not mean to suggest that the more political works that came after the uprising completely dominated public spaces, instead they continued to live side-by-side with those 'less political' ones. The newer, politicised works took on a far more ornate and intricate form than simple texts (though these also existed). Broadly, the newer forms of graffiti and street art can be classified as pieces or murals (Abaza 2016). Stencils were also a prominent feature. Stencilling, while distinct from graffiti, often combines features of graffiti and tagging (Carrington 2009). The murals are particularly intriguing in their aesthetic qualities. Artists borrowed frequently from Western and non-Western traditions, resulting in "a fascinating fusion between a variety of cultural artistic traditions that portray Egypt's rich history, namely, Pharaonic, popular

Islamic, and contemporary traditions” (ibid: 320). Consider, for example, the work of Alaa Awad, whose art relied on a heavy usage of Pharaonic iconography, in an attempt, I would posit, to subvert and reclaim such imagery in an effort to re-examine the Egyptian state and citizens’ relationship to it.

Alaa Awad, born in 1981, is a muralist and painter from Luxor in the south of Egypt. He is classically-trained, having attended the College of Fine Arts in Cairo. At the time of the uprising, Awad was working as an assistant lecturer and was completing a doctorate in fine arts at South Valley University in Luxor. He took a break from teaching at the university and moved to Cairo to paint vibrant, bold murals across the city in a neo-Pharaonic style (see figures 1, 3 and 4). As well as their style – straddling a unique place between graffiti and street art – Awad’s murals are striking due to their surreal, unsettling effect. Awad has acknowledged the influence of ancient Egyptian art on his work, although he adds a “modified and more contemporaneous feel” (Awad 2014). His works, mostly on Cairo’s Mohamed Mahmoud Street, became emblematic of the kind of new art of the uprisings.

In February 2012, along with fellow fine arts graduate Ammar Abo Bakr, Awad spent fifty days painting the wall of the American University in Cairo (AUC), and the Lycée Français School on Mohamed Mahmoud Street, just a short walk from Tahrir Square. The result was a 100-metre long mural in response to the massacre of 74 football supporters at a sports stadium in the city of Port Said (BBC 2012). Pro-revolutionary forces believed the incident was pre-meditated on the part of the police to exact revenge on a politically-active group of football ultras. Awad appears to pay much closer attention to symbolism and iconography in his work than his fellow street artists. His section of the mural depicted tombs, gods, animals and suckling women (Morayef 2016: 196). I found myself drawn to his work due to its unsettling nature. What was Awad trying to say with these images? How did they connect to the political turmoil in the country at the time?

Scholarship on Egypt's graffiti has often overlooked the semiotic and iconographic elements present in the post-uprising works. They have also featured a fascination with the figure of the 'rebel artist', frequently portrayed as a male "doing something illegal, against a system that shall not know about his existence" (Eikhof 2016: 17). When they have analysed symbolism (primarily the work by Mona Abaza), scholars have tended to focus on the 'revolutionary' moment from 2011-2012, thereby ignoring the aftermath of the uprising and the changes such symbolism underwent as revolutionary spaces grew smaller. Furthermore, as I will indicate in my analysis of Awad's work, scholarship on Egyptian street art and graffiti post-2011 has seen them primarily as a subversive medium to speak truth to power. In doing so, we risk missing how graffiti and street art, even as a subversive form, often relied on tropes and motifs that had long been utilised by the Egyptian state for the purposes of nation-building.

For the purposes of this article, I will focus on three sections of the joint Awad-Abo Bakr mural. A closer inspection of the iconography present in Awad's art reveals that not only do his paintings make use of the Pharaonic as a theme, but also in the manner the works are laid out. Ancient Egyptian art is often arranged in the form of scenes, or the actions carried out by the main figures (Müller 2015: 79). These actions are normally arranged in continuous sequences on buildings (traditionally temple walls or tombs). Thus, we can subdivide the scenes into smaller units that tell a narrative of continuous signs (ibid). Awad begins the story from right to left with the *Mural of Loyalty and Obedience* and the *Mural of the Regime* (figure 1) that depicts a row of bearded men kneeling and offering tributes to a mouse king that is being fanned by a cat. The *Loyalty and Obedience* section of the mural – the bearded men in particular – appears to be a critique of the Muslim Brotherhood and other Islamist groups who were the largest organised political blocs in the country at the time. Non-Islamist activists frequently criticised Islamic-leaning groups for alleged blind adherence to their respective leaders. The original scene that inspired Awad's mural is the 18th Dynasty on the Tomb of Sobekhotep, that

depicts Asiatic peoples bringing tributes to the Egyptian Pharaoh (see figure 2) (Hamdy 2014: 149). Awad's take is highly political, simultaneously criticising Islamists and lampooning the trope of the 'tyrannical Pharaoh' by depicting the leader as a mouse.



Figure 1 Mural of the Regime (left side) and Mural of Loyalty and Obedience, Alaa Awad, Mohamed Mahmoud Street, February 2012 source: wikiart.org, other anti-military graffiti has been scribbled over the top



Figure2 Painting from the Tomb of Sobekhtop, 18th Dynasty, source: British Museum

In the next section of the mural, *The Mural of the Court* (figure 3), we see the jackal-headed god Anubis weighing the heart of a deceased with a feather from Ma'at, the goddess of truth and justice. The scene depicted is from the Egyptian Book of the Dead; if the heart weighs heavier than the feather, the deceased is condemned to non-existence (Morayef 2016: 198). In addition, the goddess of beauty Hathor who appears to be suckling a younger male figure. In interviews, Awad has stated that the suckling woman represents Suzanne Mubarak, Hosni Mubarak's wife whose image as 'Mama Suzanne' was a common sight in state-run media, while the young boy is a reference to Gamal Mubarak, the family's youngest son who was widely believed to be tipped for power as his father's successor (Awad 2012, Abaza 2012). The reference to the Mubarak family in the context of justice is Awad's comment on the perceived injustices faced by activists compared to the lighter sentences handed down to former regime figures (Morayef 2016).



Figure 3 *Mural of the Court*, Alaa Awad, Mohamed Mahmoud Street, February 2012. Source: wikiart.org

The mural then moves on to depict a row of women in flowing robes holding batons, marching determinedly led by a shaven-headed woman. On first glance, *Women in the Funeral March*

(figure 4) bears resemblance to an image in the Temple of Roy in Luxor dating back to the time of Ramses II (Awad 2012) that depicted a funeral procession (figure 5). However, Awad's decision to change small details, such as the addition of weapons, transforms the painting to one of resistance and battle, and the women depicted from mourners to warriors. The direction the women are marching towards provides an additional clue: they are heading away from Tahrir Square and towards the Ministry of Interior's feared headquarters on Bab el-Louk Street (Morayef 2016). The act of appropriating themes and tropes associated with the status quo is a powerful tactic of resistance, acting as symbolic reversals that show "all the intimate familiarity with power that has been apparent in other spheres" (Tripp 2013: 306). By subverting the very images that power has sought to indicate its control acts as a kind of dissensus, as demonstrating "the presence of two worlds in one" (Rancière 2010: 37). Awad utilises the pharaonic motif, one that was used extensively by the Egyptian state throughout the 19th and 20th centuries (see Baron 2005 and Colla 2007) in an attempt to foster a new form of revolutionary identity, one that was located between two forces: the police, military and established political figures on the one hand, and Islamist groups on the other.



Figure 4 Women in the Funeral March, Alaa Awad, Mohamed Mahmoud Street, February 2012. Source: artfoun.com



Figure 5 Funeral scene depicted in the Temple of Roy, Luxor, source: osiris.net

However, there is no guarantee, as Stuart Hall reminds us, that cultural forms will necessarily be either progressive or regressive (Hall 1983: 194). Culture will often feature a combination of dominant and oppositional elements. We can see this duality in Awad's work, particularly in his portrayals of women and religion. His representations of women hearken back to the Pharaonic-inspired nationalism of the 1920s and 1930s that sought to portray Egypt as a unique entity in the region and the world. Furthermore, his distinction to Islamists primarily revolved around women's bodies. Discussing Women in the Funeral March, Awad says of the women: "[they] are nude; they are beautiful. They are not covering their bodies. We are Muslims but we don't believe in the Wahhabi style of Islam that has been imported to Egypt. Egypt has a long, long history and its own traditions" (Awad 2012). The point here is that even the subversive graffiti of the revolution reproduced similar discourses on Islamism and women's bodies that would emerge in force during the military-backed takeover in 2013.

Aesthetics, politics, space: the thought of Jacques Rancière

Awad's use of space is key to his works' subversive potential. By using urban space as his own temple wall, Awad allows for a shift in people's relationship with the spaces around them. As a spatial practice, street art can 'punch open' the imposed order of everyday life (de Certeau 1984: 102), allowing for a way of 'being in space' that questions those everyday conceptions of space.

It is this spatial aspect we see in Awad's work that is compelling in Egypt's street art and that allowed it to play such a pivotal role during moments of revolution and upheaval. To understand the relationship between aesthetics and space I will turn to the thought of Jacques Rancière, who holds a unique understanding of aesthetics, politics and space and their interconnectedness. For Rancière, what we normally assume to be politics (formal institutions, the capacity to wield power etc.) does not constitute politics, but what he terms 'the police' (Rancière 1999, 2010). The police order is a "symbolic constitution of the social" (2010: 36). Its power lies not in repression (though this is also present), but in a certain way of dividing up social and sensory life, what he calls the *partage du sensible*, often translated into English as the distribution of the sensible (Rancière 2004). Rancière's own definition of the distribution of the sensible is "that system of sensible evidences that discloses at once the existence of a common and the partitions that define the respective places and parts in it" (2000: 12). This division or distribution assumes a certain hierarchy in social life whereby people occupy different levels on that hierarchy (May 2010). Crucially, 'the police' will present these divisions as self-evident facts.

Therefore, politics for Rancière, is a form of collective action emerging from the presupposition of equality, and occurs when those deemed to be unequal declare themselves to be equal and show the police's framework to be arbitrary and unfair (Davis 2010). Politics is thus always

disputatious and involves a degree of struggle. It is also both creative and dramatic, involving a rupture of the overarching police order in a theatrical and argumentative manner. Politics ultimately leads to the emergence of a political subject into “the realm of perception, of visibility and audibility” (Davis 2010: 86). But politics not only breaks with the existing status quo, but is fundamentally a break with the very idea that such a status quo should exist in the first place (Rancière 2010: 36).

While the aesthetic element of Rancière’s political philosophy has been discussed widely (see for example, May 2010, Davis 2010, Haedicke 2013), the spatial side has not received as much attention, with the exception of the work by Mustafa Dikeç (2005 and 2015). This is unfortunate, as spatiality is central to his conceptions of politics/police, and opens potentially new avenues for understanding revolutions and political change and, as I will indicate, the proliferation of street art during such moments.

Space is crucial to Rancière, in terms of the ‘police order’ and to its rupture. The police order creates certain sensory experiences and presents them as self-evident facts. Here Rancière differs with Michel Foucault, for whom the police is an institutional device implicated in power. The police for Rancière is rather a form of symbolization, one that as Dikeç states “consolidates orders of time and space, hierarchies of place” (Dikeç 2015: 91). The police order is that which decides what a space is for, declaring “Move along! There is nothing to see here!” (Rancière 2001).

For politics to ‘happen’ then, it must also be a spatial practice that challenges the given places of the established order. Politics therefore transforms this space of ‘moving along’ into a “space for the appearance of a subject: the people, the workers, the citizens” (ibid). The political moment is therefore an encounter of two logics, the police and the logic of equality through “the construction of a common space where a wrong can be addressed and equality

demonstrated” (Dikeç 2015: 97). This common space is not given, but politics creates it, brings it to life. There are two competing forms of spatiality for Rancière's politics. The police uses space to identify, place, order and fix to achieve stability. Politics, on the other hand, resists this by creating its own spaces when equality is wronged by the status quo.

The fact that space is therefore crucial to both politics and ‘the police’ makes it clear that Rancière is not after some kind of ‘pure’ politics. The ‘police order’ and politics are enmeshed and intertwined. This is an important point as a counter to readings of Rancière that interpret his politics as somehow completely outside of the police’s logic (for example Žižek 2004). Politics cannot create entirely new spaces, but rather acts upon existing spaces and reshapes them.

Street art and graffiti as dissensual urban practices

Thus, if we are to view politics as the transformation and appropriation of space for dissensus to manifest, as the “coexistence of two worlds in one”, how can we interpret the role of street art and graffiti in times of uprising? I would argue that the spatial aspect of street art and graffiti is key to their dissensual power. Street art and graffiti are able to interact directly with an audience in a way that ‘completed artworks’ in a museum or art gallery cannot, allowing for audiences to question their everyday surroundings. There are two points here related to street art’s particular ability to bring about a political impact despite not displaying an obviously ‘political’ message. Firstly, street art can alter people’s aesthetic experiences through a “superimposition of an unfamiliar world of imaginative possibility on the familiar world of everyday life” (Haedicke 2013: 6). Street art can draw our attention to the existence of competing narratives to the city.

As discussed in the previous section, politics is a confrontation between the logic of the ‘police order’ and the logic of equality, and this confrontation will frequently take place in urban

centres (Davidson and Iveson 2018). Here, I understand the city as the product of various economic, social, cultural and political processes. A city is “simultaneously process and object, imagined and material, relational and relative” (ibid: 33). The processes that make up a city are in constant flux; therefore, a city’s identity is never fixed. Crucially, in Rancièrian terms, the ordering of a city is part of an aesthetic regime that ‘distributes the senses’ and the hierarchies of social life (Rancière 2003, Iveson 2016). It is exactly a city’s aesthetic ordering that street art acts upon, disrupting it and showing an alternative vision of the city.

Street art and graffiti, by scribbling on the policed order of a city make a visible ‘dissensus’ possible. The existence of a public space is therefore crucial for street art to ‘happen’. This may seem self-evident but public spaces are not a given, they are brought about and animated by collective action (Butler 2011). It is in a public space that a visible ‘dissensus’ can take place, where a “vernacular of solidarity and defiance” (Tripp 2013: 261) can be established.

As we saw earlier, Alaa Awad re-appropriated public spaces and turned them into ephemeral, impromptu temple walls. In doing so, not only was he ‘carrying the museum into the streets’ (Tripp 2013: 280) he was also taking the familiar, almost clichéd images of Egypt and transforming them into surreal, unsettling murals.

However, inscribing a visual ‘dissensus’ on the police order does not necessarily constitute a transformation of that police order. A street art practice that contributes to a political movement would “also involve a parallel articulation of street art and graffiti with the enactment of a democratic authority premised on our equality” (Iveson 2017: 92). This brings us to the second point related to street art’s specific political potential as a spatial practice. Street art and graffiti are a shift away from representational art as event, what Haedicke refers to as a move from *about-ness* to *event-ness*, which demands greater interaction with the audience (Haedicke 2013). This reading is influenced by Deleuze and Guattari, for whom art was revolutionary,

representing a power of ‘becoming’ through the creation of something new. Rather than being a mere representation of the world, art offers a way of seeing and thinking that can be shocking or provocative (Deleuze and Guattari 1994, Haedicke 2013). This ‘becoming’ constitutes an instability in the spectator, who does not only experience art, but participates in its ‘becoming’. Aesthetic events therefore trigger double moments: there is an experience of art that can challenge common sense, and also a moment of reflection on the aesthetic, political or ethical consequences of that experience.

Thus, aesthetic events are ones that disfigure and disrupt imagination, producing what Rancière calls the “formation and education of a specific type of humanity” (Rancière 2004: 24). An artwork becomes what he calls a ‘third thing’ linking spectator and artist. The spectator, in Rancièreian terms becomes emancipated by translating this ‘third thing’ into his or her own experiences and creating new forms of knowledge (Rancière 2009, Haedicke 2013). This new knowledge can create new social norms that disrupt the status quo (Haedicke 2013), acts of dissensus that spread and repeat, leading to a sense of solidarity and active equality.

Egypt’s street art as spatial politics

Egyptian street artists have demonstrated an awareness of how their works related to the space around them, stating that they used street art and graffiti with the explicit intention of occupying streets during demonstrations and confrontations with security forces (Abaza 2016). Protest sites were identifiable by the sheer number of images, signs and messages sprayed onto the walls. Figure 6 below, for example, was one of several murals that were painted onto the walls of the AUC by Ammar Abo Bakr on Mohamed Mahmoud Street. This was the same location of Abo Bakr’s work that featured Alaa Awad’s murals discussed above. This newer mural, painted in November 2012, features the portraits of various ‘martyrs’ who had been killed by security forces. Painted in graphic detail, the murals are accompanied by the text: “if the picture

still needs to be clearer, the reality, my friend, is uglier”. The images were intended to confront viewers who were still perhaps unconvinced by accusations security forces had used force against protestors. They were also intended to mark territories as ‘belonging’ to the protesters, as alternative sites beyond the state’s immediate control.



Figure 6 Martyr mural, Ammar Abo Bakr, Mohamed Mahmoud Street, Cairo, November 2012, source: Jasmin Fritzsche-El-Shewy

Scholarship on Egypt’s graffiti has often focused on the figure of the lone rebel artist (Eikhof 2016), ignoring how a large number of them were created collaboratively, or with the express intention that they be added to by other artists later on. Johnston has called this a kind of ‘visual palimpsest’, whereby images are “continually over-drawn and reused to support the narrative and aesthetic of the next painting” (Johnston 2016: 185). These visual palimpsests point towards a democratic endeavour to re-imagine public spaces away from state domination to spaces of collaboration and solidarity. Each painting or message on a wall then becomes an invitation to onlookers to observe, comment or simply ignore the artworks altogether (Shehab 2016), but always on the basis of the equal intelligence of the onlooker.

The most striking example of this kind of evolving, collaborative art is the *Tank vs. Biker* mural painted by Ganzeer in the middle-class area of Zamalek. The original (see figure 7 below) was drawn in May 2011 and shows a stencil of a military tank pointing or moving in the direction of a man on a bike carrying a bread board over his head. The biker represents a frequent sight in Egyptian life, it is a common method of transporting bread from bakeries and shops. The unarmed figure encounters the potential violence of the Egyptian state, represented by the tank. The artist Sad Panda later added his trademark figure behind the biker, glumly observing the events unfolding.



Figure 7 The original 'Tank v Biker' mural, May 2011, photo: *suzeeinthecity* 2012

In January 2012, anonymous artists whitewashed the sections between the biker and the panda and added the images of 15 protesters with their arms raised in surrender, while others appear to be getting run over by the tank (Shehab 2016). This is likely a reference to the 9 October Maspero attacks, where unarmed Coptic protesters were run over by military tanks (*suzeeinthecity* 2012). Shortly after, pro-army loyalists calling themselves the Badr Battalion erased the images of the protesters and the biker, leaving only the tank and the message 'the

people and the army are united' was sprayed opposite the tank (Shehab 2016). Activists again responded (see figure 8 below) by painting a large depiction of Field Marshal Mohamed Tantawi, then head of the ruling Supreme Council of the Armed Forces and de facto head of state. Tantawi is depicted as a monster crouching on all fours with a lifeless human body between its teeth (Shehab 2016), in a manner that recalls Francisco Goya's 19th century painting *Saturn Devouring His Son*.



Figure 8 Mohamed Khaled's addition of the 'Tantawi Monster' and other additions by the Mona Lisa Brigades, circa January 2012, photo: suzeinthecity 2012

Conclusion

In this article, I have examined Egypt's post-2011 uprising street art and graffiti from a somewhat different perspective to existing literature on the subject. Much of what Abaza has called the "oversaturation" of attention on graffiti and street art (Abaza 2017) has taken on two forms, both of which I have tried to shift beyond. Firstly, there has been a view of graffiti as a side-product of the 'main event' of the uprisings. This view tends to limit its understandings of 'the political' to so-called high politics: elections or the formal avenues of political participation, for instance (Bleiker 2009). Thus, cultural products such as graffiti and street art are only understood as a form of freedom of expression, rather than as a site of politics in

themselves. The second approach has been to focus on the artists as cultural producers, or as activists. This type of scholarship – while useful for gaining an insight into the strategies and techniques street artists use to navigate difficult political contexts – can at times problematically recreate the image of the ‘lone rebel artist’, working atomized against an authoritarian system. Such a view obscures the collaborative nature of a majority of Egyptian graffiti work.

Instead, I have focused on the artworks themselves, highlighting their semiotic and iconographic elements, which can help us gain a wider understanding of politics involving people who are often excluded from prevailing narratives. At the core of my argument has been that Egypt’s post-revolutionary street art were a key part of the country’s political struggle against successive regimes. Street art and graffiti were thus sites of politics in themselves. To illustrate this, I have pointed to street art’s capacity to act as part of a politics of ‘dissensus’, of showing the presence of two worlds in one. I have taken my cue from Rancière’s understanding of politics as an inherently *spatial* practice. Everything regarding politics, he explains:

“turns on the distribution of spaces. What are these places? How do they function? Why are they there? Who can occupy them? For me, political action always acts upon the social as the litigious distribution of places and roles. It is always a matter of knowing who is qualified to say what a particular place is and what is done in it” (Rancière 2003: 201)

This logic of politics comes into conflict with the overarching aesthetic order of a city, what Rancière calls the ‘police order’, that distributes roles and wrongs the principles of equality of people.

The marking of walls in Egypt point to a larger battle over what can be seen and said in public spaces and who has the right to political life in the country. Egypt’s street art were drawn with the intention of ‘capturing’ public spaces for the revolutionary cause. In doing so, they helped

transform the sites pre-marked by the ‘police order’ as sites of circulation, of ‘moving along’, into spaces where people could be seen and heard as equals, where they could stop, observe and question the very spaces they were occupying. Street art therefore brought about a visual ‘dissensus’ onto the ‘police order’.

Furthermore, there is an element of pedagogy involved in Egypt’s street art discussed here. In helping establish those spaces of ‘dissensus’, street art and graffiti are able to interact with audiences, communicating imaginaries of political life. By examining the works of Alaa Awad and Ammar Abo Bakr in particular, I illustrated how the collaborative, ephemeral nature of Egypt’s post-uprising street art sought to communicate these ideas to passers-by, always on the basis of their equal intelligence. This pedagogical element creates an unsettling effect on the viewer, forcing them to question their everyday surroundings.

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